Theories of Forgetting

Forgetting refers to apparent loss of information already encoded and stored in an individual's long-term memory.

The first systematic attempt to understand the nature of forgetting was made by **Hermann Ebbinghaus.**

Trace Decay Theory

Trace decay (also called disuse theory) is the earliest theory of forgetting. The assumption here is that memory leads to modification in the central nervous system, which is akin to physical changes in the brain called memory traces. When these memory traces are not used for a long time, they simply fade away and become unavailable. This theory has been proved inadequate on several grounds. If forgetting takes place because memory traces decay due to disuse, then people who go to sleep after memorising should forget more compared to those who remain awake, simply because there is no way in which memory traces can be put to use during sleep. Results, however, show just the opposite. Those who remain awake after memorising (waking condition) show greater forgetting than those who sleep (sleeping condition). Because trace decay theory did not explain forgetting adequately, it was soon replaced by another theory of forgetting which suggested that new information that enters the long-term memory interferes with the recall of earlier memories and therefore, interference is the main cause of forgetting.

Interference Theory

This theory assumes that learning and memorising involve forming of associations between items and once acquired, these associations remain intact in the memory. People keep acquiring numerous such associations and each of these rests independently without any mutual conflict.

However, **interference comes about at a time of retrieval when these various sets of associations compete with each other for retrieval**.

There are at least two kinds of interferences that may result in forgetting. Interference can be **proactive (forward moving**) which means what you have learnt earlier interferes with the recall of your subsequent learning or **retroactive (backward moving)** which refers to difficulty in recalling what you have learnt earlier because of learning a new material.

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In other words, in proactive interference, past learning interferes with the recall of later learning while in retroactive interference the later learning interferes with the recall of past learning. For example, if you know English and you find it difficult to learn French, it is because of proactive interference and if, on the other hand, you cannot recall English equivalents of French words that you are currently memorising, then it is an example of retroactive interference.

Retrieval Failure Theory

Forgetting can occur not only because the memory traces have decayed over time (as suggested by the disuse theory) or because independent sets of stored associations compete at the time of recall (as suggested by the interference theory) but also because at the time of recall, either the retrieval cues are absent or they are inappropriate. Retrieval cues are aids which help us in recovering information stored in the memory. This view was advanced by Tulving and his associates who carried out several experiments to show that contents of memory may become inaccessible either due to absence or inappropriateness of retrieval cues that are available/employed at the time of recall.

Cue-Dependent Forgetting- There are two different types of cue dependent forgetting

Context-Dependent Forgetting

Cues depend on the environment and situation. Memory retrieval can be facilitated or triggered by replication of the context in which the memory was encoded. Such conditions can include weather, company, location, the smell of a particular odour, hearing a certain song, or even tasting a specific flavour.

State-Dependents Forgetting

State-dependent cues are governed by the state of mind at the time of encoding. The emotional or mental state of the person (such as being inebriated, drugged, upset, anxious, or happy) is key to establishing cues. Under cue-dependent forgetting theory, a memory might be forgotten until a person is in the same state.

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